

## **The Differences of Teenagers in the 1940s Compared to Teenagers Today**

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"Teenager" was not even a word until the late 1940s. Zoot suits, bobby-soxers, soda shops, do not sound familiar. These were all things 1940 teenagers know. A teenager's life in the 1940s and today is extremely different in the areas of high school life and home life.

If you stepped into a classroom in the 1940s, you might see girls making dresses and boys training hard in physical education. At Crane Technical High School, physical education was very important because the principal wanted to keep all of the boys in tip-top shape for war. At Lucy Flower High School for girls, the students studied hat making, laundering, and beauty culture. Also, schools that had sewing classes, had a fashion show at the end of the year where the boys and girls alike would fashion what they had made. According to the Chicago Teen Exhibit at the Chicago Historical Society, the reason these classes are so different from today is "many poor and immigrant families saw little value in studying subjects like Latin and Botany. Educators knew that young people and their parents would choose school over work only if it served a practical purpose. In response, schools offered vocational and commercial courses from dress-making to bookkeeping. Growing numbers of young people soon filled technical schools". Schools taught lessons in family life, hygiene, and health. According to Joel Spring this was because "What do we do with sixty percent of students who aren't gaining

anything from a college-prep curriculum? We will give them “life adjustment education”.

In 1940, eight out ten boys who graduated from school went to war and more than half of the population of the United States had completed no more than eighth grade. In 1945 fifty-one percent of 17 year olds were high school graduates. Today, more than 13 million teenagers report to public high school classes across the United States.

The Scholastics Aptitude Tests (SAT) began in 1941. They were used as a screening device for college admission and originally as an Army intelligence test. The SATs are a major part of today's teenager's life. To get into a good college, you need to do well on the SAT, considering 60% of today' s jobs require training beyond high school compared to just 20% in the 1940s. Today's high school students take classes much different than the classes in the 1940s. They take classes such as English, Mathematics, Science (one Biology and one Physical Science), U.S. History, Civics, Economics, Physical Education, Health Education, and Elective, Art or Music or Vocational courses, Career and Technical Education, and a Foreign Language. At Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA), an advanced high school, students take math classes such as Mathematics Investigation I to MI IV. They study in-depth mathematics, and some students even work into the Calculus series of mathematics.

IMSA has numerous classrooms, an auditorium, and a swimming pool. In the 1940s, St. Michaels High School had a dark room, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, horses (for horse back riding lessons), and a bowling alley. At St. Michaels, on the first floor, there was the gymnasium and the music room, on the second floor the cafeteria, and on the third floor, the library and the chemistry labs. This school is much like today's

high school except the horses.

After school, in the 1940s, a teenager might go home, change clothes, and go to work. If your family was poor, you would work very hard after school or you did not even go to school, but worked all day, and all of your earnings would go to your family. There were not a lot of high-paying jobs available in Chicago during the 1940s. Bill Flanagan, a teenage boy during the 1940s, claims "My first official job, I got when I was 14. I was a bus boy at the restaurant on the South Side. I got \$0.25 an hour. Good money. I got \$5 a week. Of course, you could take a girl out on a date for \$5. Believe me, \$5 was a lot of money." Eva Kelley, a teenager in the 1940s, was a YMCA locker room attendant for \$0.66 an hour. Yvett Moloney, a young teenager during the late 1940s, had a rare job working in a mail order house for \$3.50 a day, and she worked at a telephone company. Other jobs did in the 1940s include working at the YMCA and teaching swimming, working at a pizza place, and working at a warehouse. Anna Tyler, an African-American teenager during the 1940s, worked at the men's club as a waitress, the office university club, Wiebolt's as a clerk, and an elevator operator. Jerry Warshaw, a teenager in the 1940s, had numerous jobs: delivery boy at the fish market, a soda jerk, at the Treasury Department, and the post office. His most memorable job was an usher captain. He had 17 men under him and got paid \$0.45 an hour. Today we still have ushers, only they work in performance theaters and at sporting venues. Many teens today work at fast food restaurants and stores such as Jewel Osco and Walgreens. Today, most restaurants and grocery stores let teenagers work there as long as they are 16 or older. Many high school students today volunteer as well as have a job because service hours are required to graduate from high school.

Because of World War II, there was rationing and victory gardens on the home front. There were scrap drives, war bond drives, and every sort of stamp for food or shoes. "The average gasoline ration was three gallons a week; the yearly butter ration twelve pounds per person, 26 percent less than normal; the yearly limit for canned goods thirty-three pounds, thirteen pounds under usual consumption levels; and people could buy only three new pairs of shoes a year", according to historian Michael Uschan. Compare that to today. Today you can buy almost anything.

"When traditionalists talk about the Family, they mean an employed Father, a stay at home mother, and two school-aged children. This profile only fits 5% of United States families today," according to historian Letty Pogrebin. During the 1940s, teenagers and their parents were usually very close. Some parents who supported the war effort left their teenagers unattended. This caused "renewed social alarm about juvenile delinquency. To answer the crisis, social guidance films shown in the classroom presented scenarios meant to shape teen behavior into more acceptable forms", according to a history of American education.

From Zoot suits to baggy pants; from sewing classes to biology; from radios to television, a teenager's life in the 1940s is very different from today. [ From Susan Ansell "High School. Education Week: High School Reform" [edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id+cfm?id+15](http://edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id+cfm?id+15)], (Oct. 4, 2004); Stephen Feinstein "Decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the 1940s, from World War II to Jackie Robinson, Chicago Historical Society, "*Teen Chicago*"; Eva Kelley interview, no date. ([www.teenchicago.com](http://www.teenchicago.com)); Yvett Mohony interview, (Nov 23, 2002); ([www.teenchicago.com](http://www.teenchicago.com)), Student Historian's interview with Meghan Murphy, (Oct. 2, 2004); High School, "*ECS IssueSite: High*

*School*”, [ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=108](http://ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=108) (Sept. 15, 2004); High School Curriculum Introduction, [www.u46.k12.il.us/high\\_school\\_curriculum\\_introdu.html](http://www.u46.k12.il.us/high_school_curriculum_introdu.html)> (Oct. 10, 2004); Sara Mondale and Sara B. Patton, *School: The Story of American Public Education*; Letty C. Pogrebin, *Family politics, Love and Power on an Intimate Frontier*; Sammy Skobel interview Nov. 22, 2003. ([www.teenchicago.com](http://www.teenchicago.com)); Tom Snyder, “Educational Attainment: Literacy From 1870 to 1979”, [www.nces.ed.gov/naal/historicaldata/edattain.asap](http://www.nces.ed.gov/naal/historicaldata/edattain.asap) (Oct. 4, 2004); Michael V. Uschan; *A Cultural History of the United States: Through the Decades the 1940s.*]